



UNDERSTANDING THE BENGALI HOMELAND NARRATIVE: A SAGA OF LOSS AND EVASIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Terminologies like 'Dangababu' (The Riot Man), 'Handa na Gadha' (Fool or Donkey), etc. were part of the political diction of Mamata Banerjee to describe Narendra Modi in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections as a reaction to Modi's statement of sending back illegal Bangladeshi refugees. Interestingly, Mamata's growing popularity seemed inversely proportional to her crossing the limits of democratic conduct. The underlining sentiment in this populist exercise is the notion of 'Bengaliness' which Mamata seemed to protect so vigorously. Growing Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh coupled with the populist politics of Mamata in West Bengal, forces one to relook at the underlining fundamentals of culture, language, and economy on which this idea of a 'Bengali' homeland is based. The paper argues that the present conditions are not such where 'homeland' discourses and practices can work. Though occasionally nationalistic poems, songs, images, etc. can act as referential points in this discourse but they fail in resisting the onslaught of populism and fundamentalism which seem to be making irreparable damage to this homeland discourse and thus denying social justice to its participants.

KEYWORDS: Homeland, Bengali, Narrative, Border, Political, Bhadrakol, Justice

INTRODUCTION

'Home' has always been a concern of scholars exploring various issues relating to the ideas of intimacy, family, kinship, gender, ethnicity, relations of production and consumption, and many more (Mallet, 2004). Whenever one talks about the idea of homeland, the primary issue one needs to engage with is the notion of belief and its ability to mold our political, social, and moral systems. The question is how one engages with his or her alternative notion of a homeland, especially in a scenario where the political realities seem to be antithetical to this said belief. In addition to this one also encounters the basic question as to whether the idea of a transnational linguistic nationalism is more empowering and real for the lower strata of society as compared to the imposed idea of centralized nationalism. This piece examines various dimensions and ideas of the homeland category 'Bengal.' It argues that the fast-changing socio-political realities have made it very difficult to hold on to the idea of a Bengali homeland even at a philosophical level. It does not advocate the complete negation of this idea and instead looks at certain versions which seem to have passed the test of time. It is true that homeland categories are not fixed entities but rather are continuously evolving and acquiring new meanings.

The case of the Bengali homeland is a curious one especially because in this region that constitutes this homeland, a nation-state has been created based on ethno-linguistic identity. The independence of Bangladesh was the zenith of a popular narrative of a singular Bengali identity category that belonged in a single homeland of Bengal, irrespective of religious differences (Van Schendel, 2001). Bangladesh's independence heralded a new paradigm for defining "national identity" in South Asia ... it was an ethnically defined nationalism that based its legitimacy on what was described as the common Bengali linguistic and cultural practices of the population, which transcended communal religious differences (Jones, 2011). This poses certain intriguing questions for this idea of Bengali homeland especially in terms of the relationship between place and identity. One of the primary questions is what does the term 'Bengal' mean in contemporary times and what relationship do the 'Bengalis' belonging to two separate political entities are supposed to share. Though not a political reality, the paper argues that common socio-cultural practices give the imagery of the Bengali homeland high levels of authenticity. The idea of a homeland provides the symbolic connection between an imagined community of people and a piece of land that is described as being the place from which the group emerged and the place to which that group belongs (Jones, 2011).

There have been two instances where the idea of Bengali homeland asserted itself and charted a political discourse in a significant manner and those are the Bengali Renaissance and the Swadeshi movement. This idea of 'home' was extended during the course of the nationalist movement into the idea of the 'motherland' where Bengal became the name of the part of the world marked sacred by the habitation of the ancestors of the Bengali people (Chakrabarty, 1995). Rabindranath Tagore's song "Amar Sonar Bangla" written during the anti-partition movement in 1906 talked about a united Bengal. Interestingly the national symbols of the nation-state of Bangladesh itself emphasize that very particular idea of a united Bengal and a Bengali homeland. The glaring example is the adoption of Tagore's song "Amar Sonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal) as the national anthem which talked about a united Bengali homeland.

The partition in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 are perhaps two watershed moments in the process of imagination of a Bengali homeland when the idea underwent massive restructuring. The idea of a Bengali homeland had to renegotiate with the emerging political realities. In this context, the growing Islamisation of Bangladesh in recent years has raised the larger question of disambiguation within the idea of a Bengali homeland. There are evolving demands for deciphering the ideas of Bengali, Bangladesh and finally Bengal from West Bengal instead of looking at them as mere constituent parts of a single entity. This practice of disambiguation has raised questions on the secular ethos of the Bengali identity. The critical question which needs to be asked is regarding the Bhadrakol hegemony and level of accommodation of the customs and beliefs of the religious minorities dating back to the days of the Bengal Renaissance.

The troubled historical narrative

Many scholars have pointed out that Bengal as a territorial entity lacked a proper codified history until the nineteenth century. This early construct of the homeland of Bengal was expansive and included a large portion of the Ganges delta in the northeast of British India (Sengupta, 2001). The famous song 'Vande Mataram' written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1870 is interesting in this regard as what was observed was that the level of inclusivity though on a geographical level was enormous but at a representational level there was growing dominance of the Hindu dominated Bhadrakol class. The song begins inclusively by describing the shared connection the population has with the land, but ends by defining the boundaries of the true people of the Bengali nation as those that recognize the land as an embodiment of a Hindu mother goddess (Bose, 1997; Jones, 2006; Ramaswamy, 2001; 2002; 2008). The decimation of this practice was very limited during the days of the Bengal Renaissance but it got overtly showcased during the Swadeshi movement. Though Tagore's song "Amar Sonar Bangla" acted as an inspiring factor the dominance of the Bhadrakol section over the movement was clear by the fact that Bankim's 'Vande Mataram' acted as its prime inspiration. The inclusivity quotient in the Bengali homeland took a hit at the explicit representation of religious imagery. As a counter-reaction to this, an alternative religiously defined homeland narrative emerged.

Who is the real Bengali? The three competing narratives

Within this Bengali homeland discourse, three narratives are primarily emerging in the present times and force one to reimagine and reconceptualize the contours of the very idea.

The West Bengal Narrative

First, is the dominant version in West Bengal where it is claimed that a pure connection with the concept of 'Bangaliana' (Bengali(ness)) is still maintained by the people of this region by strictly adhering to the traditions and cultures (primarily Hindu practices). This issue is sighted to both further the argument of a shift from secular Bengali nationalism to Islamisation by Bangladesh, and highlight a confirmation of the special bond which the Bengali Hindus share with the idea of Bengali homeland. These other narratives are increasingly dominant in West Bengal as the people of Bangladesh are described as disavowing their connection to the land and culture of Bengal (Saikia, 2003). In this narrative of homeland, West Bengal is the real and eligible claimant to the idea of 'Bengal'.

The Bangladeshi Narrative

Interestingly a counter-narrative is presented by many in Bangladesh where they claim to hold on to the true spirit of Bengali(ness). The major reason showcased in this regard is their deep commitment towards their language where the language cum independence movement plays the part of an important alibi. Symbolic objects and sites of memory play an important role in creating and reiterating a homeland category in the collective memory of a population (Jones, 2011). The larger celebratory grandeur of the Language Martyr's Day as compared to that of Independence Day and Victory Day compels one to recognize their commitment towards the Bengali language even in the face of severe opposition from the fundamentalist Islamic forces. Even the famous Shaheed Minar (Martyrs' Monument) in Dhaka coupled with many more such smaller monuments at various places throughout the country shows the deep connection that the public psyche shares with the Bengali language. These monuments, performances, and events institutionalize the perception of a unique connection between Bangladesh, the Bengali language, and the land (Jones, 2011).

The Class Oriented Narrative

But within this contesting claims hinged on the ideas of adherence to traditions and commitment to language there emerges a third narrative. This narrative is largely a class-oriented one where the real custodians of the idea of a Bengali homeland seem to be the farmers and petty laborers of both halves whose commitment to the language remains much more robust as compared to the Bengali bhadraloks. The economic situations condition them to be more accommodative as far as religious sentiments are concerned. Even the fructification of a sense of Bengali camaraderie is observed in the work culture and pattern of this particular section that has to venture into each other's areas at designated times of the year and in some cases throughout the year. In this homeland narrative, the territory is represented as a symbolic home for the entire group that provides a sense of belonging, security, and a common purpose (Bishara, 2003; Mack, 1993; Yngvesson, 2003).

The border as a mere political arrangement

As far as the idea of a Bengali homeland is concerned the border is a mere political arrangement and is newer compared to the socio-economic arrangements which make much more sense to its participants. The idea of a homeland provides the symbolic connection between an imagined community of people and a piece of land that is described as being the place from which the group emerged and the place to which that group belongs (Anderson, 1991; Kaiser, 2002; 2009). In the present context, this sense of belonging is not limited to a mere philosophical arena but there are its practical dynamics of which the economic is most important. A careful look at the demography profile of many work sectors in the state like farming, cottage industry, handicrafts, etc. clearly shows that a lot of these are dominated by Bengali Muslims. Now interestingly many of these people belong to both sides of the border and work on both sides. Here the ecological condition is another great factor that contributes to this exchange of workforce. This narrative of the homeland also describes the territory as a functional political and economic unit. This argument has been put forward much earlier also by the supporters of the United Bengal Scheme, who included prominent Hindu leaders Sarat Bose and K.S. Roy. They had very clearly said that the region was a functional economic unit that would be devastated and substantially weakened if divided. The devastation which the jute industry underwent post-partition in West Bengal is a glaring example of this. The Bengali nation operates and thrives on a day-to-day scale and not at a symbolic diplomatic level championed by the governments of both countries. The political reality of nation-states coupled with their features (geographical border being one of them) acts as hurdles in this day-to-day imagination of a Bengali nation. This perception is reified by the new border fence that India has built around Bangladesh since 2002, which further inscribes the boundary into the landscape (Kabir, 2005). There is an effort to impose the concept of the border into the larger setting of Bengali homeland which though seems to fail to initiate separate and distinct homeland narratives.

The present complicated scenario

In recent times there have been enormous changes in the political, sociological, and mental landscape of both the geographical regions which constitute the idea of a Bengali homeland. This has had a tremendous impact on the perceptive lenses of many observers and participants of the Bengali homeland discourse.

The Distortions within the Bangladeshi Narrative of Homeland

As far as the idea of linguistic nationalism is concerned, Bangladesh is surely an exception. The Bangladeshi independence movement, which began primarily as an effort to gain greater autonomy within Pakistan, attempted to eschew communal politics and instead described the identity category Bengali as a post-communal grouping of everyone who spoke the Bengali language and lived in Bengal (Van Schendel, 2001). In the preceding years, there have been attempts by some political forces to change this fundamental understanding by replacing it with both Islamic fundamentalism and soft Islamisation. This though has been countered by movements like Shahbag. The larger fight here is about the mediation of the narrative of identity. The growing severance between the two ideas of Bengali and Bangladeshi in the political discourse has hurt the Bengali homeland narrative as the secular undertone coupled with the idea of linguistic nationalism is getting hampered.

The growing politics of the 'other' in West Bengal

This growth of hyper-religious nationalism in Bangladesh is giving rise to a reactive mechanism in the other half of the geographical entity of the Bengali homeland. There is a politics of aversion where a separate homeland narrative specific to West Bengal is carved out. Here the political entity of Bangladesh plays the role of the 'other.' At this juncture, the 'generational question' must be considered which dictates the level of resonance with any imaginary landscape and also the sense of belonging and identity. The reason why the idea of Bengali homeland does not resonate as strongly with the present generation as it does in most cases with the older generation has something to do with Alvis' words 'with pain and resultant wisdom'. Along with pain also comes wisdom, because exiles understand the importance of their homeland more fully than those who have never suffered its loss (Alvis, 2010). Largely the present generation of expellees has not directly experienced the trauma of partition and has not labored assiduously to assimilate into the society of present-day West Bengal as done by their earlier generations. The stimulation which drove the first generation of migrants is bound to be less for many members of the present generation. Moreover, the tremendous changes in the political landscape of the state in contemporary times have hurt the idea of a Bengali homeland. The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter BJP) as the major political opponent of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) replacing the Left has given rise to a new sense of collective which is a religious undertone. What is under attack is a larger sense of linguistic camaraderie which has been the trademark of the state's societal canvas. The 'Rabindra and Nazrul' sandhas (evenings) are a good example of it where a Brahmo and a Muslim personality are being celebrated as representatives of a rich linguistic culture. The core philosophy of a Bengali homeland which is the acceptance of religious plurality coupled with a sense of linguistic unity and a sense of identity emerging from it is being challenged by political Hindutva.

Mamata's political stratagem

It is this politics of negation of the BJP that Mamata is trying to fight. Interestingly, her tactics are not one of adopting a typical 'secular' stand but instead by making religion a strong civil actor. In Mamata's politics, the narrative of a Bengali homeland is created through the process of identity recognition, where the unifying factor of language is unaffected by the explicit recognition of other identities. The relationship between Bengal and Bangladesh goes beyond borders ... we share a deep bond of culture, language, and a deep history of brotherhood (Mamata, 2016). The latest instance in this regard is the inauguration of the Bangladesh Bhavan within the Visva Bharati University campus which celebrates the rich cultural and literary tradition shared by the two regions. The fundamental question facing the Bengali homeland narrative in today's time is how will an independent Bengali identity tackle the Hindu-Muslim divide coupled with the nationality question and create an alternative space for itself. The Bengali movie Shankhachil (which interestingly is an India-Bangladesh joint venture) takes up this question beautifully and humanely. But these joint artistic projects and endeavors can act as referential points in this discourse on the Bengali homeland but cannot take forward the discourse beyond a certain point, especially with the onslaught of populism and fundamentalism.

CONCLUSION

The harsh reality remains that none of the narratives of "Aamar Sonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal) are actual Bengalis. 'Golden Bengal' is merely an emotional entity with historical betrayals, injustices, unimaginable trauma, rich culture, and an undying sense of belonging as its constituent parts. It is a ballgame where the emotional and sociological realities are in a constant tussle with the imposed political ones. It is a constant strive to achieve something imaginable but not achievable. It is this ability to imagine which gives all the participants in this exercise a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging that the politics of the land has failed to provide at times. In present times the biggest political battle is not about the detailing of the past events, but rather the structuring of the cognitive aspect of the participants in tandem with one's political goals and desires. It is a fight between history and memory. History seeks to explain the event, the memory of pain refuses the historical explanation and sees the event causing the pain as a monstrously irrational aberration (Chakrabarty, 1996). The political struggle is primarily here, where on the one hand the historical happenings (including partition) are portrayed as an exemplar of the ever-present incompatibility between the religious participants of this idea of Bengali homeland and on the other hand where partition is presented as a mere aberration in the otherwise imperishable linguistic camaraderie thereby surpassing all religious and nationalistic differences. Perhaps an unclear definition and an uncertain commitment to secularism which sadly has been the common political reality of the entire subcontinent acts as a major hurdle even in the philosophical realization of a Bengali homeland narrative with its rich syncretistic tradition.

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